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ABSTRACT

Collaboration has become a pervasive strategy for systemic change in human services, education, government, and community agencies. Collaborative partnerships require a change in thinking and in operating. Such changes can be intimidating or threatening. In addition, other barriers must be overcome to make partnerships work. Examples of successful collaborations are as follows: the Workforce Development Center in Waukesha, Wisconsin, which provides an integrated, seamless system of employment services; and the Learning Community in Flint, Michigan, that exemplifies the trend toward integrated family service centers that include training and educational opportunities for adults and children. Successful collaborations require a great deal of effort to begin and continuous attention to sustain. Six categories of success factors are environment, membership, process/structure, communication, vision, and resources. Steps for developing collaborations include the following: (1) envisioning results; (2) empowering the effort; (3) ensuring success; and (4) endowing continuity. Successful collaborations focus on changing the system. The key is the quality of personal and professional relationships among the people in the agencies and communities involved. (Contains 10 references.) (YLB)

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Developing Collaborative Partnerships
Practice Application Brief

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by Sandra Kerka
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PRACTICE APPLICATION BRIEF

Developing Collaborative Partnerships

Collaboration has become the byword of the 1990s as a strategy for systemic change in human services, education, government, and community agencies. Increasingly, public and private funders are rewarding or requiring collaborative efforts. The advent of block grants is creating an urgent need for integrated, locally controlled services. Shrinking resources are causing many organizations to consider the potential benefits of working together. States are looking at ways to integrate their economic, work force, and technology development efforts (Bergman 1995). Perhaps most important is the realization that the complex problems and needs of families, workers, and communities are not being met effectively by existing services that are "fragmented, crisis oriented, discontinuous, and episodic" (Kadel 1991, p. vi). Collaboration involves more intense, long-term efforts than do cooperation or coordination. Collaborating agencies make a formal, sustained commitment to accomplishing a shared, clearly defined mission. Collaborative efforts can overcome such problems as fragmentation of client needs into distinct categories that ignore interrelated causes and solutions. They can make more services available or improve their accessibility and acceptability to clients (Melaville and Blank 1993).

Collaborations require a change in thinking—the ability to see the "big picture"—and in operating—alteration of structures, policies, and rules to make service delivery seamless. Such changes, or "paradigm busting" (Bendle/Carman 1996) can be intimidating or threatening; in addition, other barriers must be overcome in order to make partnerships work: negative past experiences with collaboration; difficult past/present relationships among agencies; competition and turf issues; personality conflicts; differing organizational norms, values, and ideologies; lack of precedent; and fear of risk (Anderson 1996; National Assembly 1991). This *Brief* looks at successful collaborations involving work force development, family literacy, and welfare reform to identify the elements that make collaborations effective. Based on existing guidelines and successful programs, the steps needed to create and sustain collaborative relationships are described to help adult, career, and vocational educators forge the linkages that could improve services.

Collaborative Examples

One-stop career centers are collaborative efforts among agencies that have traditionally provided employment and training services such as information, counseling, referral, and placement; U.S. Department of Labor funding has supported their development in several states. Before the federal initiative, a prototype arose in Waukesha, Wisconsin (Anderson 1996), where the Workforce Development Center provides an integrated, seamless system of employment services through the joint efforts of nine public and private agencies, including the state job service, a technical college, child care center, labor organization, and county health and human services department. A foundation owns the building in which combined agencies' staffs are located; a local area network, client tracking software, and access to the state JobNet enables information sharing. The center has shortened the time and cost of dependency on public funds and given employers access to a worker pool.

The Learning Community (Bendle/Carman 1996) in Flint, Michigan, is an example of the trend toward integrated family service centers. From a collection of independent programs that began networking, it has grown into a formal collaboration that shares administrative resources and core services. Participants include the public school system, adult basic education, Head Start, Even Start, employment services, and community education programs. Adults have opportunities to improve academic, job, and parenting skills; find employment; and help their children learn. Children participate in educational and enrichment activities, and families are supported with child and health care, transportation, food, and clothing. Beyond its core service agencies, the Learning Community works with a variety of public and private human service agencies and businesses. Participants emphasize that "the Learning Community is not a program. The Learning Community is a system, a concept, a philosophy, a new way of operating an organization . . . a vision of all programs working together to meet the needs of our families" (ibid., p. i).

What Makes Collaboration Work?

Successful collaborations require a great deal of effort to begin and continuous attention to sustain. Before embarking on the process, collaborators should consider how the following elements might be developed in their situation. Six categories of success factors are environment, membership, process/structure, communication, vision, and resources (Mattessich and Monsey 1992).

Environment—a history of collaboration or cooperation in the community; favorable political/social climate; strong local leadership; a convergence of needs, public opinion, legislative priorities, and agency readiness; a catalytic or galvanizing event (Imel 1995; Melaville and Blank 1993; Wynn, Merry, and Berg 1995). These environmental elements often create the impetus for getting started and provide clues to gauging the degree of difficulty that might be encountered. Even when the environment is less than optimal, "collaborating partners should consider strategies and tactics for improving the climate" (Mattessich and Monsey 1992, p. 18). It is important to make a start.

Membership—diversity (representation of all segments of the community and multiple provider sectors); mutual respect, understanding, and trust; ability to compromise; recognition that collaboration is self-interest (National Assembly 1991; Winer and Ray 1994; Wynn, Merry, and Berg 1995). Manageable collaborations strike a balance between breadth and depth of membership. Diversity means that both providers and consumers of services are represented. Most important is understanding "how organizations operate, their cultural norms and values, limitations and expectations" (Mattessich and Monsey 1992, p. 19).

Process/Structure—members have a stake in process and outcomes; decision making is participatory; the group is flexible in organizing itself to accomplish tasks and adaptable to change; there are clear roles, responsibilities, and policies. Collaborating groups are cautioned not to create new bureaucracies. Instead, structures should be designed to facilitate information exchange, decision making, and resource allocation. "Most partnerships work best when the partners create a structure that helps

members manage the extra work that happens when collaborating begins" (Winer and Ray 1994, p. 82).

Communication—open and frequent, through formal and informal channels, culturally sensitive and reflective of different communication styles (Kadel 1991; Winer and Ray 1994). "The bedrock of collaboration is trust" (Bendle/Carman 1996, p. 7). Good communication is a key to building trust. Communication is enhanced by setting up systems—personal, paper, electronic—for information sharing, clarifying each agency's responsibilities, clearly expressing expectations, and listening. Winer and Ray describe collaboration as a journey in which travelers encounter and acknowledge diverse customs, use of language, preferred ways of working, and types of power.

Vision—a desired service system or improved community is often what spurs collaboration to begin. Collaborative partners should have a shared vision of what they are trying to achieve, with agreed-upon mission, objectives, and strategies. Their purpose should be unique, that is, overlapping but not duplicating the mission of individual organizations. A shared vision builds trust and commitment. It should reflect responsiveness to the community and the big picture of which the collaboration is a part. Concrete, attainable goals for accomplishing the vision heighten enthusiasm and sustain momentum (Melaville and Blank 1993; Winer and Ray 1994).

Resources—money, staff, technology, training, information, contacts (Winer and Ray 1994). Financial resources include those that member organizations are able/willing to commit and those the group obtains from outside sources. Human resources include a skilled convener or coordinator, committed leaders, and the right mix of knowledge, skills, and abilities among individual members.

How to Form an Effective Collaboration

Winer and Ray (1994) describe four steps for developing collaborations: envisioning results, empowering the effort, ensuring success, and endowing continuity. ***Envisioning results*** involves (1) bringing people together by deciding criteria for membership, inviting participation, and getting to know one another; (2) enhancing trust by sharing knowledge, disclosing self-interests, ensuring that all stakeholders' needs are met, and producing visible results so that people feel their participation is justified; (3) confirming the shared vision by developing vision statements that indicate where the group wants to go; and (4) specifying desired results, the agreed-upon goals and objectives that state how the collaboration will achieve its vision (Kadel 1991; Melaville and Blank 1993; Winer and Ray 1994).

Collaborations can ***empower the effort*** by (1) obtaining authority to act, clarifying roles and securing commitments, and specifying what each agency contributes and what it can expect; (2) resolving conflict—realizing that conflict can be expected and can be dealt with by having a conflict resolution process in place, clarifying issues, focusing on goals, and exploring alternatives; (3) organizing the effort—forming a structure, determining roles and staffing, and securing resources; and (4) supporting members by establishing a decision-making protocol and communications plan and recognizing and rewarding participants (Kadel 1991; National Assembly 1991; Winer and Ray 1994).

Ways to ***ensure success*** include (1) managing the work by establishing an action plan based on vision and goals, developing collaborative work habits, and determining accountability; (2) making necessary changes in collaborating organizations such as altering policies and procedures to ensure responsiveness to the other agencies; (3) evaluating and continuously improving the effort, using multiple methods; and (4) renewing the effort (Melaville and Blank 1993; Winer and Ray 1994; Wynn, Merry, and Berg 1995). Collaborations should be adaptable and flexible, evolving to meet new needs. For example, the Learning Community (Bendle/Carman 1996) found that Head Start children needed immunizations, parents of infants/toddlers wanted a support group, and early childhood volunteers needed training; new or existing collaborative partners were found to meet these needs. Renewing the effort also involves recognizing and addressing the causes of flagging momentum, such as loss of focus or leadership, unequal involvement of members, failure of projects, burnout, and poor planning (National Assembly 1991).

Endow continuity through efforts to (1) make the collaboration visible—convey an image, publicize and promote results, involve the media; (2) involve the community—invite participation from youth groups, businesses, grassroots community organizations; and (3) sustain the effort by periodically reassessing the mission and vision, involving new leadership, and securing diverse funding (Kadel 1991; Winer and Ray 1994).

Ultimately, successful collaborations focus on changing the system, whether it be integrated profamily service delivery such as the Learning Community, one-stop career/employment services such as the Workforce Development Center (Anderson 1996), or a learning consortium for small business worker training such as the National Workforce Assistance Collaborative (Bergman 1995). The key is the quality of personal and professional relationships among the people in the agencies and communities involved: people who recognize that collaborations require patience and trust, take time to build, and accommodate organizational and community cultures and who keep focused on the "big picture" of a better future for their constituencies.

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